Picturing music in Islamic art

ANNA CONTADINI

MUSIC MAKING and musicians are widely represented in the arts of the Islamic Middle East, both in manuscript painting and on objects in all materials.[1] The main areas of representation are:

1. entertainment, often related to the princely cycle (everywhere, all times, all regions).
2. ceremonial,[2] birth, circumcision and other celebrations (usually in later periods).
3. warfare, i.e. music to spur on the soldiers and/or frighten the enemy. This is less common, but is present from earlier periods.[3]
4. religious ceremonies, usually Sufi (less common, and in later periods).

The musicians on the Courtauld bag are certainly to be assigned to the first group, and are possibly to be associated with the princely cycle, depending on the interpretation given of the scene on the lid. They are integral to scenes of entertainment, whether princely or not, where they are portrayed together with, variously, food, drink, perfume and hunting, as on the bag.[4] As the association with entertainment was a constant, it was also possible to imply it through the portrayal of a musician in isolation, and of this we have numerous examples in all media.[5] So, the fact that the musicians are represented alone on the bag, within their roundels, is not surprising. Considered together, the ensemble they form, consisting of flute, lute, harp and frame drum (see roundel below), is a typical one for intimate – and frequently indoor – entertainment.

The Courtauld bag (cat. 1), detail of roundel with musician

The connection with entertainment is reinforced, or made explicit, by a reference to a related activity, most obviously drinking, through the inclusion of beakers and bottles. The inclusion of floating scarves may suggest dancing, as this is a feature normally associated with dancers. They contrast with the floating scarf of the rider in the central medallion, which is definitely a double scarf going around his neck (a motif that goes back at least as far as Sasanian and early Islamic iconography), for they emerge, incongruously, from the side of the haloes surrounding the heads of the musicians playing the frame drum, flute and lute. Further, they turn around to form a loop before descending to a wider lower end with horizontal stripes probably denoting decorated *tiraz* bands. However, turbans in early thirteenth-century metalwork are often represented with a floating and looping tail, and a more prosaic explanation would be that in later metalwork, as in the case of the bag, the connection was lost and it became just a decorative motif.

The iconography of the flowing and looping scarf coming out from the halo is also found in other pieces of metalwork depicting musicians, such as in the image of the harpist with a flutist on the Blacas ewer

FIG. 23
The Blacas ewer, Mosul, 629/1232
(cat. 21), detail showing harpist and flutist

(cat. 21 and fig. 23).[6] But while its inclusion in scenes with musicians might suggest that it represents a scarf worn by dancers, it also appears in other contexts, such as in the figure of a mounted knight with a crossbow,[7] in a bird-hunting scene[8] and (without a closed loop) beside the figures of two sword fencers with shields.[9] Whether or not dance is implied on the bag by the floating scarves, representations of dancers with such scarves are present from early periods. One example is a dancer in the painted ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, placed close, moreover, to a frame-drum player who, like the one on the bag, is striking the instrument with a beater. This playing technique is also found elsewhere, for example on an ivory plaque made in Egypt in the twelfth century,[10] and on the Vaso Vescovali made in Afghanistan around AD 1200.[11] The iconographic record thus suggests that this technique was geographically widespread, from the Mediterranean to eastern Iran, but it is not consistently shown and is in any case confined to early representations: all later examples show the modern technique of using open-hand strokes (at the centre) and finger strokes (at the rim). The instrument, which is of particularly frequent occurrence, is represented played by both men and women. It is still played today, and it is principally at festivities, and in particular at weddings, that there are women performers.

One question is whether we can use musical information to say something more precise about the date and provenance of objects. The answer is both yes and no but, unfortunately, more frequently no. Even if we may assume a generally high level of realism in the representations of instruments, some of which are extremely detailed, there is no archaeological record against which they can be matched, and in most cases textual references and descriptions are insufficient to supply a very precise dating or distribution for a given instrument.[12] A particular feature, the number of pegs (and hence strings) on a lute, say, might give a crude indication of date, but such evidence would do no more than confirm a case already made on the basis of art-historical analysis. Some instruments are ubiquitous (lute, flute, frame drum), while others do seem to be used more in one area than another (hornpipe in Spain,[13] qanun (large zither-type stringed instrument) in Mamluk territories, harp in the Persianate and Ottoman worlds), but the dividing line is seldom sufficiently sharp to serve as a reliable diagnostic tool: an instrument with generally Persian associations may be encountered on an Egyptian artefact. As might be concluded from this, the grouping together of instruments in an ensemble is equally unlikely to provide any clear indication, particularly as depictions coming from the same period and place may show a degree of variation in the size of the ensemble and the nature of its constituents.

For later periods it is usually easier to match an instrument with a date and a geographical area, but such information is potentially more useful for musicologists than for art historians. It may be helpful for the art historian to know that by the eighteenth century the harp had become obsolete in western Asia,[14] but we already knew that later representations of Bahram Gur with Azada and her harp are prolongations of a well-established iconographical tradition rather than a reflection of contemporary practice. The harp is, in fact,

FIG. 24
'The court of Sultan Sanjar ibn Malik Shah', from Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles*, Tabriz, 714/1314–15 (fig. 22), detail showing the harpist

one of the more commonly represented instruments, from the earliest Babylonian representations and the Sasanian Taq-i Bustan reliefs.[15] Closer in date to the Courtauld bag is the illustration of a heavily bejewelled lady playing for Sultan Sanjar ibn Malik Shah in a manuscript of the *Compendium of Chronicles* dated 714/1314 (fig. 24).[16] Depictions of the harp are frequently very realistic, with the performer portrayed using a thumb-and-first-finger plucking technique, as on the bag (see roundel p. 98). The only significant difference between this harp and those in miniature paintings lies in the reduction of the number of strings resulting from the constraints of the medium. Otherwise the morphology is standard, clearly belonging to the zoomorphic type, where the soundboard terminates in the shape of the head of an animal, usually a bird. Another very beautiful metalwork example is provided by the probably Southern Italian casket in the Treasury of San Marco, Venice, which shows both a barbed lute player and a harpist, again using the thumb and first finger technique.[17] The size of the harp increases with time, at least in the Persian environment, as we can see in Timurid and Safavid paintings from 1481 and 1509–10.[18]

It is difficult to draw conclusions about gender: most instruments can be found being played by either men or women in different places and at different times. To generalise, iconography suggests that after the thirteenth century women generally played the harp, men the flute, and especially the shahrud (extra large-bellied lute), while both could play the frame drum and the lute. Earlier accounts of singing slave-girls associate them with a variety of instruments, including the frame drum;[19] at the ᶜAbbasid court they performed mainly on the short- and long-necked lutes (oud and tunbur),[20] while later the qanun was also favoured by Mamluk female singers.[21] In one of the frontispieces of the *Kitab al-Aghani* (fig. 25), painted in Mosul, *c.* 1215–19, we actually find, in a row at the bottom of the page, an all-female ensemble playing the same instruments as represented on the bag – frame drum, flute,[22] lute and harp. This combination of percussion, wind and string instruments is quite typical. Various types of plucked string instruments are found represented on artefacts and paintings, and one may suggest that less important than the differences in sonority between them was the contrast between the sustained notes of the wind instruments and the sharper attacks and quicker decay of the string instruments, the attacks reinforcing the rhythmic structure articulated by the frame drum.

A striking painting of a female lute-player is found in the Mamluk *Maqamat* now in the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, dated 734/1334 and probably produced in Damascus (fig. 26).[23] This is an all-male party scene, with the exception of a woman wearing sumptuous garments, and a light, transparent veil so her face is visible, and with henna marks on both hands and feet. She is playing, left-

FIG. 25
Frontispiece to the *Kitab al-Aghani* (Book of Songs), vol. 4, Mosul, *c.* 1215–19
Ink, colours and gold on paper
Cairo, Dar al-Kutub, Adab Farsi, 579

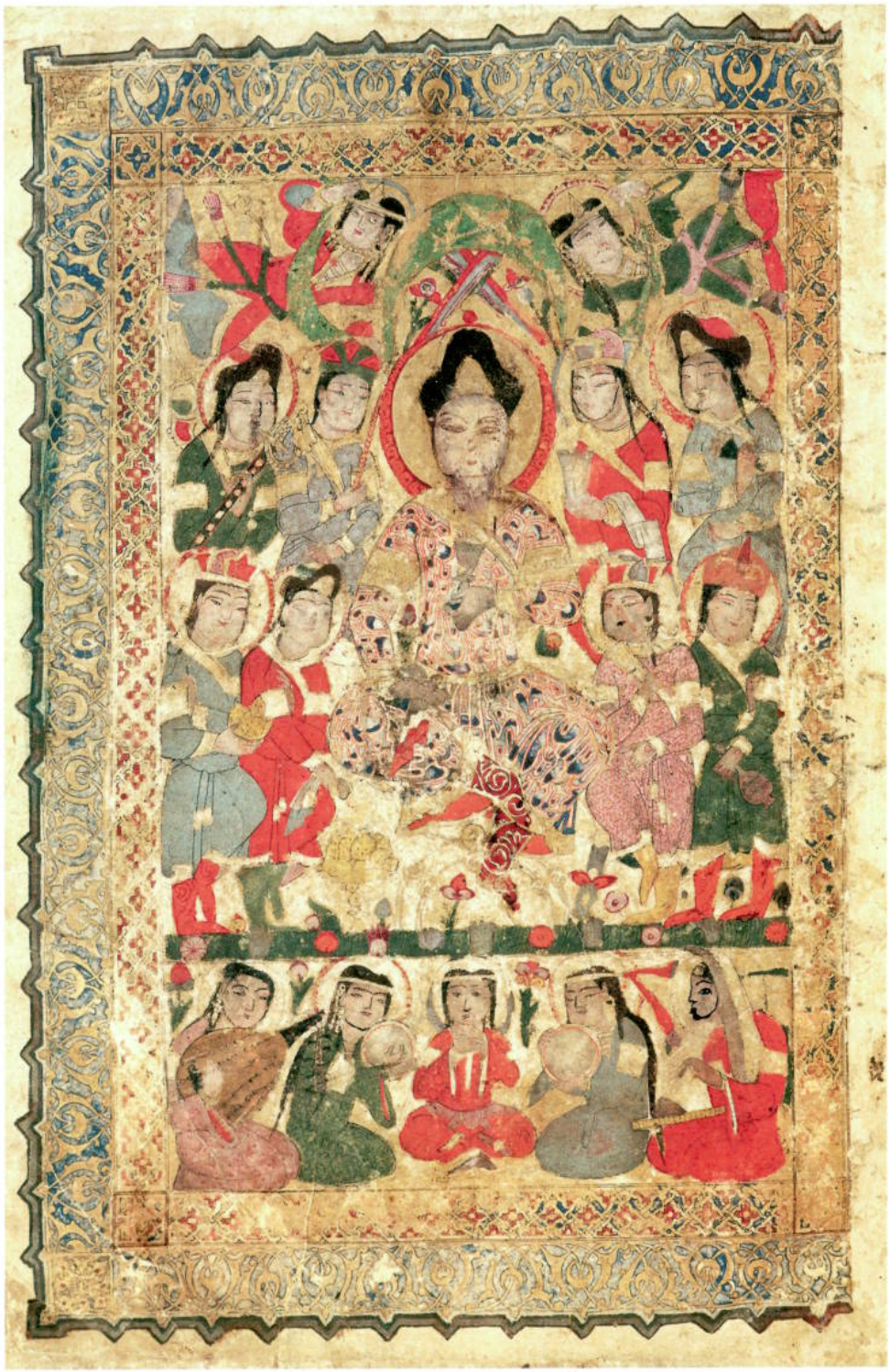

FIG. 26
Tavern scene, from the Vienna *Maqamat*, probably Damascus, 734/1334
Ink, colours and gold on paper
Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, A.F.9, fol. 42v

FIG. 27
Drawing of a lute (oud) from the musical treatise *Kanz al-tuhaf*, Iran, 14th century
Ink, colours and gold on paper
London, British Library, I.O. Islamic 2067, fol. 17v

handed, a lute with beautifully carved decoration, and sitting cross-legged at the same level as a male figure who holds a beaker in one hand and caresses her face with the other. The proximity and posture of this prominent pair, who are in the front plane, is parallelled in metalwork, with a prince being entertained by a female musician, but, although the posture of the two main figures depicted on the band on the lid of the Courtauld bag is remarkably similar, they appear to form a couple being entertained musically by a lute player on the far right. Similar in date is the diagrammatic representation of the oud in the fourteenth-century manuscript *Kanz al-tuhaf* (fig. 27).[24]

In the medium of metalwork, comparison of the bag with the earlier Blacas ewer (cat. 21 and fig. 23), made in Mosul in 629/1232, is particularly instructive. Here we have two couples, lute and frame drum, harp and wind instrument, the same combination of instrument types as on the bag, but now with the gender of one of the musicians clearly indicated, as the lute player wears a veil that covers her face up to the eyes.[25] We have a similar disposition of the figures, with roundels of musicians, dancers and also drinkers, surrounding the larger ones of riders and hunting scenes, so that, despite differences of shape as well as date, the compositional strategy of the two pieces is remarkably similar.

NOTES

1 A broad survey is found in Farmer 1976. Although by no means comprehensive, this is still an essential reference work.

2 As in the *hajj* send-off in the *Maqamat* manuscript dated 634/1237, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS arabe 5847, fol. 94v. See Ettinghausen 1962, p. 119.

3 For example, an illustration in Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles* dated 714/1314, Edinburgh University Library, Ms. Ar. 20, fol. 156v. See D.T. Rice 1976, pp. 114–15, no. 38.

4 For general background on musical behaviour at the ᶜAbbasid court see Sawa 1989; and for the Timurid court see Subtelny 1984.

5 For example, a fragment of a Fatimid lustre-painted bowl, where the lute, played by a female musician, has a piriform shape with a lovely bent peg-box with eight pegs (that is with four doubled courses) very clearly marked, Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 11121. See Philon 1980, pl. XXII, A. Or on a *mina'i* bowl where a musician takes central stage, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 57.61.16. See Fehérvári 1985, p. 148.

6 See also the lute player with a dancer on a brass candlestick made in Cairo, *c.* 1270, Allan 1982, p. 83. Also a woman playing the lute on the basin made for the Ayyubid Sultan al-ᶜAdil II (1238-40) in Syria or Mosul, Paris, Musée du Louvre, OA 5991, published in D.S. Rice 1957, p. 306, fig. 31a and pl. 6a.

7 This figure is on the Freer Canteen, possibly made in Mosul, *c.* 1230-40, Washington D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, F1941.10. See Raby 2012, p. 51, fig. 1.25a.

8 It appears next to a figure holding a blowtube on the Barberini Vase, made in Mosul or Syria for the Ayyubid Sultan al-Nasir Yusuf (ruled 1237-60), Paris, Musée du Louvre, OA 4090; see D.S. Rice 1957, fig. 23.

9 On the aforementioned basin made for Sultan al-ᶜAdil II in the Louvre see D.S. Rice 1957, pl. 8d.

10 Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, inv. 80c 3. See Contadini 2005, fig. 132.

11 London, British Museum, OA 1950.7-25.1. See Farmer 1976, p. 65, fig. 52.

12 The most important early account is that by al-Farabi in his *Kitab al-musiqi al-kabir*, translated in d'Erlanger 1930. His concern, however, is primarily with the scales produced on the instrument in question, so that materials, structure and use are largely ignored. On materials and structure the most precise information is provided by the mid-fourteenth-century *Kanz al-tuhaf* (Tsuge 2013, pp. 165-84), while the early fifteenth-century *Jamiᶜ al-alhan* of al-Maraghi (al-Maraghi 1987, pp. 198-20) gives a general catalogue, with brief descriptions, of the instruments encountered in Timurid Samarkand. With the exception of the oud, for which a certain amount of factual descriptive material is available (see Neubauer 1993, pp. 279-378), modern attempts to reconstruct earlier forms have had to rely on the iconographical record. See Franke and Neubauer 2000.

13 See Reynolds 2006.

14 See Feldman 1996, pp. 154-56.

15 Farmer 1976, p. 17.

16 See D.T. Rice 1976, pp. 174-75, no. 68.

17 Venice, Tesoro di San Marco, inv. no. 123. M.V. Fontana in Venice 1993, no. 297, pp. 477-80.

18 Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Per. 162, 886/1481, fol. 229r, and Per. 182, 915/1509-10, fol. 256r.

19 Farmer 1929/1973.

20 Sawa 1989.

21 al-Baqli 1984.

22 It is not always possible to distinguish between flutes and reed-pipes.

23 See discussion in Contadini 2012, pl. 32 and p. 81.

24 Tsuge 2013, fig. 11, p. 181. There is also a small miniature in the *Kashf al-humum wa-'l-kurab fi sharh alat al-tarab*, a probably fifteenth-century work dealing with instruments (Cairo, Dar al-kutub, *funun jamila* 1).

25 Ward 1986, fig. 78.

COURT AND CRAFT

A Masterpiece from Northern Iraq

EDITED BY

Rachel Ward

THE COURTAULD GALLERY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
PAUL HOLBERTON PUBLISHING
LONDON

First published to accompany the exhibition

COURT AND CRAFT
A Masterpiece from Northern Iraq

The Courtauld Gallery, London
20 February – 18 May 2014

The Courtauld Gallery is supported by the
Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

Exhibition Support

SPONSORS

Friends of The Courtauld
Oryx Petroleum

SUPPORTER

GardaWorld

THE GOVERNMENT INDEMNITY SCHEME

This exhibition has been made possible by the provision of insurance through the Government Indemnity Scheme. The Courtauld Gallery would like to thank HM Government for providing indemnity and extends its thanks to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and Arts Council England for administering the scheme.